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SUBJECT: GREECE AND THE GREAT WHITE FLEET

REF: STATE 152640

1. Summary: Embassy Athens recommends a low-key, primarily military-to-military commemoration of the centennial of Theodore Roosevelt's Great White Fleet, to be planned in connection with the visit of a US Navy ship in late 2008 or early 2009. Although the port of Piraeus here appears to be one of the least well-documented stops on the historic voyage, perhaps because of the political turbulence Greece was experiencing at the time, we note that one of the participating ships and another that welcomed the fleet home to Virginia were later sold to the Greek Navy. These two smaller, Mississippi-class ships performed coastal patrols and training missions for some two decades as the Kilkis and the Limnos before being retired and, ultimately, destroyed by the Germans early in World War II. Post may also be interested in distributing books and materials produced in connection with the event to selected high-level military, civilian government, and academic contacts. End Summary.

2. The January 11-19, 1909 visit of part of the Great White Fleet near Athens is documented, according to Eleftherios Venizelos and his irreverent "great idea" to national prominence. (The new international airport in Athens bears his name.) Within a few short years, Greece entered the Balkan Wars and, after initial territorial gains, was soundly defeated by the Turks in Asia Minor. The culminating, catastrophic flight of the Greek-speaking residents of Smyrna (Izmir) in 1922, the next stop on the Great White Fleet's itinerary, is still painfully resonant here today. It was at the center of last year's long-running, nation-wide controversy over updating children's history textbooks.

3. It is also important to note that large-scale Greek immigration, itself a reflection of political and economic difficulty, peaked during the voyage. As Richard Clogg writes in his Concise History of Modern Greece, in the decades surrounding the turn of the last century, one in seven Greek men left the country, most for the United States.

4. These historical and modern circumstances, and the fact that two ships that either participated in the Great White Fleet's voyage or welcomed it back home, the Mississippi and the Idaho, were sold to the Greek Navy about 1914, suggests a low-key, primarily military-to-military centennial commemoration. These ships performed coastal patrols and training missions for some two decades as the Kilkis and the Limnos before being retired and, ultimately, destroyed by the Germans in the early months of World War II. Including U.S. Coast Guard representatives in a ship visit to Greece would therefore be appropriate and helpful to link the Great White Fleet's piracy deterrence function to today's transnational threats. SPECKHARD